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IS GOD THE CAUSE OF SIN? AN EXAMINATION OF THE UNADORNED PRIVATION DEFENSE

Peter Furlong

In this paper I will investigate one way of resolving the apparent tension between the following three propositions, endorsed by some theists: (1) Every worldly event is a consequence guaranteed by God's unimpedible causal activity, (2) People sin, (3) God is not the cause of sin. In particular, I will examine what I will call the unadorned privation defense, which has roots in Aquinas and continues to find defenders. I will argue that although defenders of this view successfully rebut certain criticisms, their defense ultimately fails to reconcile these three propositions.

In this paper I will investigate one way of resolving the apparent tension between the following three propositions, endorsed by some theists:

- (1) Every worldly event is a consequence guaranteed by God's unimpedible causal activity.
- (2) People sin.
- (3) God is not the cause of sin.

Some may think that these three propositions are not simply in tension, but are incompatible. Several philosophers, however, claim that these propositions are neither incompatible, nor in tension with one another. Some such philosophers defend this claim with what I will call the privation defense.

The key claim of a privation defense is that sin is "composed" of two elements: the act of sin and a defect. The defect is not itself an entity, but is only a privation. One reason for thinking that God is the cause of sin is that God is the cause of all other entities. If one grants that one of the two elements of sin is not an entity, then it is easier to see how God might not be the cause of sin.

I will be focusing my attention on one variety of privation defense, one which I will call the unadorned privation defense (UPD). UPD tries to show that the three propositions discussed above are not in any real tension with one another. I call this defense unadorned because it attempts



to show the compatibility of these propositions through an analysis of the general nature of causality, privations, and activity. It does not, for example, try to defend the compatibility of the propositions by invoking the unusual properties of divine causality that allow God to guarantee the occurrence of an event without technically being the cause of it. What I will call adorned defenses, in contrast, directly appeal to the unusual nature of God's causality in order to show that these propositions are compatible with one another. It should be noted that an unadorned defense may be put forward by a philosopher who believes that God's causality is radically different from that of creatures, but who nonetheless thinks that this difference is not the key needed to understand why the propositions under discussion are mutually compatible.

It is important to be clear about the scope of UPD as I have defined it. This defense is merely an argument for the compatibility of (1), (2), and (3). Even if UPD is successful in showing the compatibility of these three propositions, further important questions remain, most importantly, is God blameworthy for the presence of evil in the world? UPD does not attempt to answer this question. Nevertheless, discovering whether (1), (2), and (3) are compatible is important for two reasons. First, even given a satisfactory theodicy, Christians will likely want to say that God is not the cause of sin. If this claim is incompatible with other beliefs, then it is important to know this. Second, discovering whether (1), (2), and (3) are compatible can aid in formulating a theodicy. If, for example, it is always evil to cause another to sin, then a good God cannot cause but may merely allow sin. If (1), (2), and (3) are incompatible, and it is always evil to cause another to sin, then in formulating theodicies one may need to abandon strong accounts of divine sovereignty and perhaps of divine providence as well. The viability of UPD is, therefore, worthy of attention.

I will argue that the unadorned privation defense faces an important difficulty. Although several objections that have been raised against this view can be adequately dismissed, there is another objection that, I will argue, is not so easily defeated. I will begin by providing a brief overview of UPD. I will then turn to some possible objections and replies to this defense. I will then present what I take to be the most serious objection to this view. Finally, I will consider some possible replies to this objection and evaluate avenues for theists who reject the unadorned defense.¹

¹Some may think that this project deserves little attention because whether or not they are compatible, the first proposition, "every worldly event is a consequence guaranteed by God's unimpedible causal activity," is obviously false given Christian beliefs. Generally, this claim is supported by an appeal to libertarian theories of moral responsibility. Libertarianism is, however, very controversial, and it is not clear that Christianity entails or even lends support for it. Indeed, some scholars think that Augustine and Aquinas are compatibilists, and Luther, Calvin, and Edwards do not seem particularly committed to libertarianism. If Libertarianism is false, then (1) is particularly attractive for Christians because it secures God's absolute sovereignty over the entirety of creation. These brief remarks are not meant to show that (1) is true, but merely to show that Christians should not take the first proposition to be obviously false.

The Unadorned Privation Defense

Privation defenses, of one sort or another, are not new. Several such defenses have their roots in Aquinas's discussion of the nature of sin.² Whether the defense offered by Aquinas is really an unadorned defense is not clear, but it has seemed so to some of his followers.³ Whatever the case may be, the unadorned privation defense deserves to be discussed simply on its merits. This defense has had a number of proponents, but few as clear as W. Matthews Grant.⁴ For this reason, I will especially draw from his description of this defense.

According to UPD, we can distinguish the act of sin from the sin's defect, which together form the sin itself. Consider the following case: Paul desperately wants a new Rolex, but is unable to afford its high price. One day he notices that someone in his office has carelessly left one on a nearby desk. Paul, realizing that nobody will spot his action, takes the watch for himself. Paul's act of stealing the watch is the sin itself.⁵ The act of sin is Paul's act of taking the watch insofar as this is in act or has being. This may seem identical to the sin itself, and indeed there is no positive difference

²For Aquinas's discussion of whether God is the cause of sin, see *Summa Theologiae*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Westminster, Md.: Christian Classics, 1981), I-II, q. 79, a. 2. All quotations of this work will be from this translation. For defenses rooted in Aquinas's thought, see R. Garrigou-Lagrange, *God: His Existence and His Nature*, vol. 2, trans. Dom Bede Rose (London: Herder Book Co., 1947), 365–396; Jean-Hervé Nicolas, "La permission du péché," *Revue Thomiste* 60 (1960), 5–37, 185–206, 509–546; W. Matthews Grant, "Aquinas on How God Causes the Act of Sin without Causing Sin Itself," *The Thomist* 73 (2009), 455–496. It is not always easy to see whether a given privation account is adorned or not, since those who put forward privation accounts tend also to think that God's causal activity is radically different from that of created agents. At least in Grant's case, it seems that even if the special nature of God's causal activity is important for understanding how God relates to human actions, it is not the key that resolves the apparent tension between (1), (2), and (3).

³It is possible to argue that Aquinas does not present what I am calling an unadorned privation defense for two reasons. First, some might argue that Aquinas's discussion of the radical distinction between primary and secondary causality is key to his defense of the compatibility of the three propositions. Second, he might not be trying to use his account of the privation of evil as a defense of the compatibility of the three propositions under discussion. Indeed, some have argued that he denies the truth of the first proposition. See, for example, Jacques Maritain, *God and the Permission of Evil*, trans. Joseph W. Evans (Milwaukee: Bruce Miller Publishing Co., 1966); Michael D. Torre, *God's Permission of Sin: Negative or Conditioned Decree* (Fribourg: Academic Press Fribourg, 2009).

⁴Grant's account is particularly suitable to be taken as a characteristic UPD for several reasons. First, although he does try to show that his account is in keeping with Aquinas's work, he is more concerned with putting forward a viable defense. Second, he does not stress the importance of the radical nature of God's causal activity in his defense, so it seems evident that he is presenting an unadorned account; even if he is committed to various claims about the nature of God's causal activity, his defense does not turn on these claims.

⁵It is unclear what sorts of descriptions defenders of UPD would be willing to admit as legitimate. Could one describe the sin in each of the following ways: Paul's taking the watch, Paul's taking the watch that does not belong to him, Paul's taking the watch that does not belong to him without the permission of its owner? Some of these descriptions do not indicate that the act is defective, but perhaps they may still be used as descriptions of the sin; all descriptions, after all, under-describe. In any case, I do not think UPD requires a specific answer to this question.

between the act of sin and the sin itself. Nevertheless, the defender of UPD will insist that the act of sin does not include the defect of sin, since this is a privation and does not have being. What is this defect? Grant describes it as "a lack of conformity to moral rule or order."⁶ The idea seems to be that we can distinguish the actuality or being of Paul's act from its failure to accord with the demands of morality that govern property.

Having drawn this distinction, the defender of UPD affirms that God is the cause of the act of sin, but not of the sin itself. The claim that God is the cause of the act of sin is both important and unavoidable for many theists, and certainly for Thomists, given their commitments concerning the nature of creatures' dependence upon God. Aquinas, for example, claims that "The act of sin is both a being and an act; and in both respects it is from God."⁷ Since God is the cause of all other beings, and the act of sin is itself a being, it is clear that God is causally responsible for it in some way. This claim does not entail, however, the further claim that God is responsible for the sin itself. Although one constituent of the sin itself is caused by God, defenders of UPD deny that the other constituent, the defect, is caused by God.

This account raises an important question. Does the defect follow necessarily upon the act that God caused? It seems so. A particular, fully determinate act must be either in accord with or in violation of the moral law.⁸ If so, then is it possible to cause the act without causing the defect? If, for example, God created a house with no roof, would it be reasonable to say that God caused the positive elements of the house but not its defect of being unable to keep its occupants dry? The defender of UPD must claim that one may cause the former without causing the latter, at least in cases of sinful actions. Answering this question, it seems to me, requires a closer analysis of privations and their causes than defenses of UPD typically provide, and it is unclear to me whether defenders of UPD will be able to sustain the distinction between causing acts and causing defects that necessarily accompany those acts. In any case, if this distinction does stand, they have taken the first step towards showing that (1), (2), and (3) are compatible.

Even if one may cause an act without thereby causing its accompanying defect, it may be the case that given God's causal role in the universe, he cannot cause the act of sin without causing its accompanying defect. Indeed, defenders of this view, including Grant, seem to think that it needs to be defended against two important objections.

⁶Grant, "Aquinas on How God Causes the Act of Sin without Causing Sin Itself," 457.

⁷Aquinas, ST, I-II, q. 79, a. 2.

⁸In ST, I-II, q. 79, a. 2, ad. 3, Aquinas considers the related point that defects belong to acts in virtue of their species. He denies this, claiming that acts take their species from the objects to which they are ordered rather than from their defects. Even if this is so, however, it still appears that defects necessarily accompany or fail to accompany particular, fully determinate acts.

The first objection that must be considered is that either there is some act of the agent that makes the act of sin defective or there is not. If there is not, then the agent is not responsible and there is no sin; if there is, then God is the cause of this earlier act and is thereby also the cause of the defect. Defenders of UPD argue that it is certainly the case that if the defect is caused by a prior act of which God is the cause, then God is also the cause of the defect.⁹ It is possible, though, for the agent to be both the cause of and morally responsible for the defect even if there is no act of the agent that caused it. The claim, in short, is that the defect, which is a lack of conformity with the moral rule, is not caused by an act, but rather by an omission, which is the agent's not attending to the moral rule.¹⁰ The agent does not bring about this defect by performing some other action, but rather by not acting in a particular way. Since this omission is not itself an entity, it is not obviously the case that God is responsible for it.

This answer seems to give rise to a new objection to this position. The problem is that if the agent is considered the cause of the defect because he failed to act in a certain way, then it seems that God, too, can be considered a cause of the defect since he too failed to act to prevent the defect from occurring. Before investigating this objection further, it is important to note the relationship between God's causal activity and the actions of the agent. On this account, a created agent can perform an action if and only if God causes the agent to perform the action. Every action that every human agent has ever performed was caused by God. Moreover, every action that a human agent omitted performing could not have been performed unless God had caused it.

Some might find this account jarring. Many might, for example, worry that if it is the case that an agent acts if and only if God causes him to act, then the agent is neither free nor morally responsible for his activity. The UPD presupposes that this worry can be put to rest.¹¹ If we are even to talk about the possibility of God's causing human sins, humans must be able to sin.

This strong claim about the need for God's causality seems to heighten the worry that he is a cause of the defect of sin through his own omission. It is not simply the case that he could have done something and chose not to do so; his inaction guarantees the omission. If God does not cause the agent to attend to the moral rule while he is acting, then it follows that the

⁹Grant is explicit on this point. See Grant, "Aquinas on How God Causes the Act of Sin without Causing Sin Itself," 459–460. This position seems implicit in other privation accounts, such as that of Garrigou-Lagrange. See Garrigou-Lagrange, *God*, 380–396.

¹⁰Defenders of UPD do not themselves agree on how to understand the nature of this omission, although this detail will not be important for our purposes. For a discussion of the controversy, see Grant, "Aquinas on How God Causes the Act of Sin without Causing Sin Itself," 465–477.

¹¹I do not mean, of course, that defenders of this view merely assume that there is some way of reconciling God's causality with human freedom, but rather that the UPD does not, by itself, reconcile these two things, yet is meaningful only if they can be reconciled. For such a reconciliatory account, see Garrigou-Lagrange, *God*, 268–396.

agent will not attend to the moral rule. Thus, there seems to be a powerful reason for supposing that God does, in fact, cause the defect in the sin, and since he also causes the act of sin, he can be said to cause the sin itself. Grant formulates this worry, writing, "Given that God's causing guarantees the sinner's considering, and that God's not-causing guarantees the sinner's not-considering, does it not follow that it is also caused by God in virtue of God's not causing the sinner's consideration?"¹²

In order to respond to this objection, Grant, following Aquinas, suggests a list of necessary and sufficient conditions that must be met in order for an agent to be a cause of something in virtue of not acting.¹³ He proposes the following conditions:

Effect *e* is caused by agent *S* in virtue of *S*'s not *f*-ing if and only if

- (a) *S*'s *f*-ing would have insured or at least made it likely that *e* not occur, and
- (b) *S* had the power to *f*, and
- (c) *S* ought to have *f*-ed.¹⁴

It is surely right that we need some way of deciding just when an agent can be said to have caused something through inaction.

The plausibility of these criteria is strengthened by considering a situation Grant discusses. Suppose that you come home from work and notice that the fish food, which you sprinkled into the aquarium hours earlier, remains uneaten. What might have caused this? Consider the following three possibilities:

- (I) The food is still floating because your goldfish didn't eat it
- (II) The food is still floating because the plants didn't eat it
- (III) The food is still floating because the water didn't dissolve it.¹⁵

Each possible explanation has recourse to the inactivity of some substance. In each case the substance did not, in fact, act, and if any had acted, then the food would not be floating. Surely if the plants did manage to eat the

¹²Grant, "Aquinas on How God Causes the Act of Sin without Causing Sin Itself," 477.

¹³The source of this position in Aquinas is ST, I-II, q. 6, a. 3. "Now one thing proceeds from another in two ways. First, directly; in which sense something proceeds from another inasmuch as this other acts; for instance, heating from heat. Secondly, indirectly; in which sense something proceeds from another through this other not acting; thus the sinking of a ship is set down to the helmsman, from his having ceased to steer. But we must take note that the cause of what follows from want of action is not always the agent as not acting; but only when the agent can and ought to act. For if the helmsman were unable to steer the ship or if the ship's helm be not entrusted to him, the sinking of the ship would not be set down to him, although it might be due to his absence from the helm."

¹⁴Grant, "Aquinas on How God Causes the Act of Sin without Causing Sin Itself," 485. I have replaced Grant's term "substance" with the term "agent" since it is much less controversial that God is an agent than that he is a substance.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 481.

food, then it would no longer be floating in the aquarium. Despite this, it is absurd to think that we should consider all of these inactivities to be causes. In particular, it seems that we say that something is a cause through inactivity only if there is some reason to think that that thing should have acted.

Grant persuasively argues that the notion of "ought" in the criteria is not that of moral obligation, but rather that of natural inclination. This allows us to say, concerning the case discussed above, that the fish are the cause of the food remaining, since they did not consume it.

With this set of criteria in hand, the defender of UPD is in a position to argue that God is not the cause of the defect in the sin through his inactivity, because it is not the case that he ought to have acted so as to prevent it.¹⁶ In defense of this claim, one might say that God cannot fail to do what he should do because he is not governed by an external rule. Thus it cannot be the case that he should have caused the agent to attend to the moral rule and failed to do so. Secondly, perhaps a thing ought to do something only if the activity in question is necessary for the thing to reach its end. Since God is his own end, it is clearly not the case that he ought to cause humans always to attend to the moral rule.

An Additional Objection to UPD

I find these responses just considered in defense of UPD to be well-argued. Indeed, I think that we are not forced to say that God is causally responsible for the defect of sin through his omission. Instead, I want to bring out a worry that is very close to, but importantly different from, that which we just considered. Remember, we just looked specifically at a defense of UPD from the claim that God is responsible for the defect of sin through his own inactivity. I want to argue that it is unclear how defenders of UPD can avoid being committed to the claim that God is the cause of the defect of sin through his activity. In order to make this worry clear, I will investigate just when we should say that one thing is the cause of another thing's omission.

First of all, I think it is clear that we sometimes do consider agents to be responsible, in virtue of their activity, for the omissions of other things. Consider the following case:

Joan and Robert have a single child, John. Joan and Robert consider many social conventions to be impositions on human freedom, and thus they do not act in keeping with them, nor do they teach John to do so. In particular, they consider the use of the word "please" to be a particularly damaging social convention, and they teach John to have a similar attitude. In their eyes, the use of this term involves inappropriate docility. John does not learn, as many other children do, that he ought to use the word "please" when he

¹⁶Ibid., 489. Grant is not the only one to place emphasis, within a privation defense, on the claim that it is not the case that God should always prevent sin from occurring. See, for example, Garrigou-Lagrange, *God*, 380.

makes requests. On one particular occasion, he asks his teacher to be excused without saying "please."

Suppose for the sake of the example that John likely would have learned to say please from others, if his parents had simply failed to discuss this term. This being the case, it seems inappropriate to say that John's omission was caused by an omission on the part of the parents to teach John appropriate manners. Instead, it seems that their positive act of teaching him that such actions are inappropriate was a cause of his omission. This, it seems, is in keeping with our normal way of providing explanations. Thus it is at least possible for agents to cause the omissions of others through activity.

Although it is clear from the above example that an agent can be the cause of an omission through his own activity, it is not at all clear what criteria must be used to determine when an agent can be considered a cause in this way. In order to aid our investigation, consider again the case Grant discusses about the pet fish.

Suppose that you come home from work and notice that the fish food, which you sprinkled into the aquarium hours earlier, remains uneaten. The cause of the state of the fish food is the inactivity of the fish. The fish should, in at least some sense of "should," have eaten the food.

What might have caused their inactivity? Presumably, there are quite a number of possible answers. Perhaps the fish gorged themselves the day before and did not desire to eat again. Perhaps the temperature of the water in the aquarium dropped, and this caused a state of lethargy in the fish. Perhaps someone had spilt some coffee into the box of fish food, and the fish did not like the way this made the food taste.

Consider the second explanation above, that the fish remained inactive because the water temperature in the tank dropped. Suppose, for the sake of the example, that the temperature drop was a sufficient condition for the inactivity of the fish. If the temperature in the tank were to drop, then the fish would unfailingly refrain from eating, barring your special intervention by, say, adding a chemical additive to the water that would make them more active. In this case, we can still say that the fish food remains floating in the aquarium because of the inactivity of the fish. Their not-eating the food is the cause of it being the case that it remains floating on top of the water.

Clearly, in the above example, we would not say that you caused the fish's inactivity if you fail to add the chemical additive to the water. Grant's criteria help explain this; it is not the case that you both can and should add this chemical to the tank. It seems, however, perfectly in keeping with our ordinary use of the word "cause" to say that the drop in temperature caused both the fish's not-eating and the food remaining on top of the water. Moreover, if you are the one who lowered the aquarium's thermostat, then you thereby seem to become the cause of (A) the temperature dropping, (B) the fish's not-eating, (C) the food remaining in the tank.

I say that this is in keeping with our ordinary usages in much the same way that Grant says that it is in keeping with our ordinary usages to say that the food is still floating because the fish did not eat it rather than because the plants did not do so. I think an expansion of the example might help show the plausibility of my claim.

Suppose the fish food you use is guaranteed to be liked by your fish. The brand is so confident in their product that they will refund your money if your fish do not eat the food. Now imagine that you seek a refund for this product because your fish did not eat it. Once the complete circumstances become known to the company, would it not be appropriate for them to refuse a refund because you caused the fish not to eat it?

I think that it is clear that we would, in fact, say that you caused the fish's not-eating. From reflection upon this one example, I do not think it is possible to derive a set of necessary and sufficient conditions for determining when an agent causes the omission of another through activity. I do think, however, that reflection on this case can yield conditions which are jointly sufficient:

The not-*f*-ing of agent *S* is caused by agent *R* in virtue of *R*'s acting if

- (i) *R* is causally responsible for state of affairs *p*
- (ii) *p* unfailingly leads to *S*'s not-*f*-ing unless *R* performs action *a*
- (iii) *R* does not *a*¹⁷

In the example above, it is stipulated that you lower the temperature of the water and thereby become responsible for the state of affairs "the fish are lethargic." This state of affairs unfailingly leads to the fish's not eating the food in the tank unless you add some chemical to the water to increase their activity. You do not add this chemical to the tank. It seems that it is in virtue of these conditions being met that you can be considered the cause of the inactivity of the fish. These are, it would seem, the pertinent details that the company would reference in their decision not to give you a refund.

It is important to note that in such a case *R* becomes the cause of *S*'s omission in virtue of *R*'s activity. *R*'s key contribution is not that which satisfies (iii), but that which satisfies (i). It is true that there is some omission of *R* that is relevant. It seems, however, that in such cases *R* becomes the cause of *S*'s not-*f*-ing primarily in virtue of what he does, not in virtue of what he does not do. Consider again the case of the fish: it seems far more in keeping with ordinary explanations to say that the lowering of the temperature in the tank caused the fish to avoid eating, rather than to say that the omission of adding a particular chemical to counter-act this effect caused it. It is true, of course, that if the agent had added that chemical, the action of lowering the thermostat would not have caused

¹⁷ Although not much hangs on this claim, it seems to me that if *R* ought to have *a*-ed, then he thereby is the cause of *S*'s not-*f*-ing through both his activity and his inactivity.

the inactivity of the fish. In some ways, the situation is similar to that of would-be causes that are impeded from reaching effects because of some outside interference. When causes are not impeded, we do not normally attribute the effect to a lack of impediment, but to the producing cause.

Now consider again the question of whether God is the cause of the defect of sin. Defenders of UPD can rightly point out that God is not the cause of the defect of sin because of his inactivity, but now we need to consider whether UPD contains the resources to deny that God is the cause of sin through his activity.

According to the view under consideration, God is the cause of everything, other than himself, that has being. A human can avoid sin if and only if God causes him to avoid it. On this account, God creates human agents along with their powers and activities, and he sustains them all in being. He also creates and sustains all other beings with which humans come into contact.

Now let us turn back to the criteria suggested above. All three criteria are met in the case of sin. The agent's not-attending to the moral rule is guaranteed, given God's activity, and barring additional intervention by God. When God does not preserve agents in grace, they unfailingly fall into sin.

Consider, in light of the above criteria, Paul and his act of theft. God (R) is causally responsible for the complete state of affairs (*p*) that includes all that has being in Paul, his environment, and indeed, even Paul's act of sin. Thus, (i) is met. Given this state (including God's free causal activity) (*p*), Paul unfailingly chooses to steal the watch, and does so without attending to the moral law (*S*'s not-*f*-ing) unless God (R) intervenes and chooses to cause Paul to start attending to the moral law (*a*). Thus, (ii) is met. God (R) does not choose to cause Paul to start attending to the moral law (*a*). Thus (iii) is met.

According to this argument, God is not the cause of the defect of sin by his omission. Nor is he the cause of sin in virtue of causing a particular act by which the agent is responsible for the defect. If the defect is caused by an omission, then there is no need to say that there is any act by which the agent becomes responsible for the omission (although he is surely responsible for acting without attending to the moral rule). Instead, God seems responsible for the omission because he is the cause of certain features of reality that guarantee the omission and in fact explain why it occurred.

If God is the cause of the defect of sin, then he is surely responsible for the sin itself. Remember, it is already granted that God is the cause of the act of sin. Since sin is composed of the act and the defect, and God is the cause of both aspects, he is the cause of sin. The unadorned privation account is simply not capable of avoiding this conclusion.

Objections

Objection 1: Sin is composed of two parts, the act and the defect. Although God is the cause of each part, he is the cause in different ways. He is the

cause of the act of sin directly. He is the cause of the defect indirectly, through bringing about a state of affairs that unfailingly leads to it. Since he is not the cause of the entirety of sin in the same way, it is inappropriate to call him the cause of sin.

Although it is certainly true that, according to the argument above, God causes the two components of sin in different ways, I fail to see why one could not still call him the cause of sin itself. An agent can be the cause of a whole in virtue of being the cause of its components, even if he causes the components in different ways. (For example, it seems that a man is the cause of his entire house in virtue of building half himself and hiring someone else to build the other half.) Without some argument to the contrary, then, it seems reasonable to hold that if one is the cause of all the various elements of sin, even if one causes them in different ways, then one is the cause of the sin itself.

Objection 2: Perhaps the argument above shows that according to how we commonly use the term “cause” God is the cause of sin. It is not the case, however, that properly speaking, given some philosophical account of causality, God should be considered the cause of sin.

I am not yet convinced that a plausible philosophical account of causality will allow privations to be caused by an agent without any activity while at the same time not permitting us to say that one agent can be the cause of an omission of another agent through activity. If you allow any such instances, it seems that the three conditions I outline above would be jointly sufficient.

Put such worries aside and suppose that the objector is right that the argument above does not raise a problem about God being the cause of sin “properly speaking,” but only according to some ordinary and non-technical way of speaking. It is still not clear that this situation is an attractive one for the theist. Presumably when ordinary Christians say that God is not the cause of sin, they mean that God is not the cause of sin in the ordinary way of talking about such things. Any defense of the compatibility of (1) Every worldly event is a consequence guaranteed by God’s unimpedible causal activity, (2) People sin, and (3) God is not the cause of sin, should aim to show this while preserving our common understanding of the claim that God is not the cause of sin.

Concluding Considerations

I began by considering the view, endorsed by many Christians, that God’s causal contribution to action guarantees a particular result. As Grant puts this, “God’s causing guarantees the sinner’s considering, and . . . God’s not-causing guarantees the sinner’s not-considering.”¹⁸ Since the not-considering, along with the act of sin, which occurs if and only if God causes it, composes the sin itself, it seems that we can say that God’s activity always guarantees whether or not a sin will occur. This position has led people

¹⁸Grant, “Aquinas on How God Causes the Act of Sin without Causing Sin Itself,” 477.

to suppose that God is the cause of sin. In light of this worry, some have proposed what I have called "the unadorned privation defense" as a response to this concern. I have argued that this account does not, by itself, alleviate the worry that God is the cause of sin. If I am right about this, then we are faced with three options. We could (a) accept the conclusion that God is the cause of sin, but argue that this acceptance is not as bad as it appears, or (b) either replace the privation account, or adorn it in some way or other, perhaps with an account of why the distinction between primary and secondary causality is the key to resolving the problem, or (c) reject the original presupposition that every worldly event is a consequence guaranteed by God's unimpedible causal activity. The complete analysis of these three possibilities is outside the scope of this paper, but I will briefly consider the viability of each one.

The first possibility is that we could grant that God is the cause of sin, but argue that while this initially seems troubling, we do not need to conclude from this that God himself sins. This could be argued in various ways, perhaps by arguing that God is simply not subject to the same moral rule that governs human action, perhaps because this moral rule is determined by his commands, or by noting that he does not thereby endanger the possibility of attaining his end. This position has been defended recently by Hugh McCann.¹⁹ I tend to think that this form of response should be a last resort, if it is to be seriously considered at all. The reason for this is that the response begins with the admission that God is the author of sin, even if he is not himself a sinner, which, at least in the minds of many, is contrary to Christian teaching. With Maritain I tend to think that the "fundamental certitude, the rock to which we must cling in this question of moral evil, is the absolute innocence of God."²⁰ He means by this not merely that God does not sin, but additionally that he in no way causes it or sees to it that it must occur.²¹

The second possibility is that we could adorn the view in some way by providing an account of the radical difference between primary causality and secondary causality. Both traditional Thomists and Molinists have tried to spell out the differences between these forms of causality, although they have not all sought to avoid the difficulties surrounding whether God is the cause of sin with this distinction. It is not enough, clearly, to point to the radical difference between these two forms of causality. One must show that, although God brings about the state of affairs

¹⁹Hugh McCann, "Divine Sovereignty and the Freedom of the Will," *Faith and Philosophy* 12 (1995), 582–598; "Sovereignty and Freedom: A Reply to Rowe," *Faith and Philosophy* 18 (2001), 110–116; "The Author of Sin?" *Faith and Philosophy* 22 (2005), 144–159; *Creation and the Sovereignty of God* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2012), ch. 6. Rowe agrees that the claim that God causes us to sin does not entail that God himself sins. See William L. Rowe, "The Problem of Divine Sovereignty and Human Freedom," *Faith and Philosophy* 16 (1999), 98–101.

²⁰Maritain, *God and the Permission of Evil*, 3.

²¹*Ibid.*, 31.

"humans are guaranteed to sin," since this is brought about by a unique form of causality, he cannot be thereby said to have caused the sin.

It is difficult to see just how the difference between the kind of causality exercised by God and that exercised by ordinary substances could alleviate the concerns that face the unadorned view. At the same time, however, one cannot always tell just what relevance such a distinction will have. The nature of this distinction certainly deserves more attention from contemporary philosophers than it currently receives.

Perhaps one possibility for such an adorned account is to argue that God's form of causality is so different from ordinary modes of causality that the everyday sense of "God is not the cause of sin" is compatible with God's exercise of primary causality. I am unsure of what fruit such a line of reasoning might bear, but it might be worth investigating.

A third possibility is that one could argue that God's activity does not bring about the state of affairs "the agent is guaranteed to not-attend to the moral rule."²² It is not difficult to see why many have found this position attractive. Besides the separate issue of making it easier to see how humans can be free, it does not even seem to imply that God is the cause of sin. Perhaps the biggest issue facing this form of response is that it makes the activities of human agents too independent of God's causality. Indeed, it seems to make agents so independent of God's causality that God's sovereignty is threatened.²³ This threat has long seemed troubling to theist philosophers, and it is a worry that is difficult to weigh. Many classical theists have been particularly concerned with preserving very strong claims about God's sovereignty, although many recent philosophers of religion are not similarly concerned. I will not attempt to settle this debate here, although this last avenue does seem to be worthy of continued investigation.²⁴

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²²For Thomists who advocate this path, see Maritain, *God and the Permission of Evil*; Torre, *God's Permission of Sin*. Contemporary non-Thomist philosophers of religion who hold this view are legion.

²³Rogers argues that Anselm's account of the relationship between God's causality and our free choices preserves divine sovereignty without making God the cause of sin. See "God is not the Author of Sin: An Anselmian Response to McCann," *Faith and Philosophy* 24 (2007), 300–310.

²⁴I am grateful to Thomas Flint, Matthew Pietropaoli, Michael Staron, S. Matthew Stolte, and two anonymous referees for their insightful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.